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ABSTRACT

Sources of stress for educators include changing social trends that indicate more and more teachers will be single parents with young children and the tightening economic situation. Deaf educators face the additional stress of slow student progress, antagonism from parents, the existence of additional handicaps in deaf children, increased requirements on teacher time due to federal regulations, and controversies in the field. Teacher stress and burnout can be prevented by building support systems, changing job assignments, recognizing teachers' achievements, granting timeout from the classroom during the day, and enlisting the help of mental health consultants. (CL)

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Support for Parents and Professionals:

A Key Issue for the Field of Deaf Education in the 1980's

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Support for Parents and Professionals: A Key Issue for the Field of Deaf Education in the 1980's

The decade of the 1970's has brought many important changes in the education of deaf children. One of the most important of these changes is the trend toward earlier educational intervention for young deaf children. Pre-school education, for deaf children between the ages of three and five years, is now generally accepted as the norm. More and more school districts are recognizing the need for beginning the educational process as soon as a diagnosis of deafness has been made. Thus, many parent-infant programs serving children from birth to the age of three have originated.

With this trend comes the realization that parents must be involved in the educational process if it is to succeed. Teachers increasingly are working with parents to show them how to communicate successfully with their young deaf children. People also have come to understand more about the impact that a diagnosis of early childhood deafness has on a hearing family, and to be prepared to offer support for families to help overcome their grief, sorrow, anger, and disappointment at the inability to change their child's handicap. The need for parent counseling at this critical time, the principle of parental support, and an understanding of the dynamics of family response to the handicapping condition have become more firmly accepted during the 1970's. Thus, a firm base has been created for further progress during the next decade.

While the principle has been established that the parents of deaf children need support, the field of deaf education has not yet grappled with the fact that the professionals who work with deaf students and their parents also need support. The general

field of education has recognized that teachers have stress-producing jobs, and many schools have moved to combat the effects of stress in the classroom.

Sources of Stress for Educators in the 1980's

As one looks to the future of education, it is not difficult to predict that schools will be under assault from many directions. We are already experiencing the pinch of a tightening economic situation, and schools are usually among the first institutions to feel the impact of inflation and recession. One expert has predicted that ". . .the U.S. education system faces a long period of diminishing demand and new competition for public dollars" (Weaver, 1979:29). Teachers' salaries are not keeping pace with the cost of living, and economic stress is an important component in heightening dissatisfaction with other aspects of one's job situation.

During the 1980's, we can anticipate change at an ever-increasing rate. Rapid social change is stressful in itself, as former habits and values no longer serve useful functions. Change, however, is necessary, and is to be expected in educational settings: "Schools must either change or be smothered by it, policy analysts and futurists admonished (a group of school administrators recently). Technology is shattering traditional patterns . . .and today's education will soon be as outmoded as quill pens" (Education, USA, 1979:57).

An important social change with great significance for schools is the continuing trend toward single parent families and the related trend toward an increase in numbers of working mothers. This means that larger numbers of teachers will themselves have young children at home, and may experience stress from the simultaneous demands

of their dual roles. This trend also means that many functions formerly fulfilled in the home are now expected to be done by the school. In the words of one teacher, "We are expected to be psychologists, sociologists, social workers, baby sitters, coaches, club advisors – and police. (We) are also expected to be patient and understanding while accepting verbal and physical abuse" (Mace, 1979:512). Other trends that may be related to rapid social change also create stress for teachers: There seems to be a widening gap between the values of students and teachers. One reflection of this gap is seen in increasing drug-related behavior among older students, and in increasing violence in the schools.

Special Sources of Stress for Professionals Working with Deaf Students

Teachers and support personnel who work with deaf students are not immune to the kinds of stress to which general educators are exposed. The relative isolation from the educational mainstream does not protect special educators from the influence of economic fluctuations and rapid social change. However, there are additional sources of stress that special educators can expect to experience. For a variety of reasons, handicapped children generally, and deaf children particularly, demand relatively more energy, patience, and commitment from their teachers than do their non-handicapped peers.

Deaf students can be expected to learn academic materials more slowly than hearing children because of the language deprivation experienced by most. Deaf students progress at approximately one-third or one-fourth the rate of students in regular classrooms. This slow progress means that teachers of deaf students must learn to accept less than "identified" success in the area that is at the very heart of their professional training. This situation may lead to occasional frustration, a questioning of professional

worth, and perhaps the sense of a lack in professional fulfillment.

This same slow rate of student progress is frequently a source of parental complaint and dissatisfaction, which is often laid at the door of the teacher or the school system, rather than at the door of linguistic deprivation and related experiential gaps. Thus, teachers of deaf children must frequently expend a good deal of their energies in defending themselves from attacks from parents, rather than in forming alliances with potentially helpful supporters.

We know that approximately one in every three deaf students has another handicap in addition to his or her hearing loss (Meadow & Trybus, 1979). Some of these additional handicaps interfere directly with learning or retention of new material; some require additional physical effort on the part of the teachers and other care-givers; still others contribute to behavioral difficulties that increase the problems of classroom management. As any additional handicap adds to the student's difficulties, it also increases the likelihood of stress for the teacher.

One of the areas of change in deaf education likely to have a major impact on teachers, students, and parents in the 1980's is related to Public Law 94-142. Most professionals applaud the intent of the law, and believe that deaf students will benefit from additional parental involvement in their children's education. They also believe in the constructive possibilities of Individualized Educational Programs. However, it must be said that new requirements on teachers' time place additional burdens and are another potential source of stress.

The teaching methods used in classrooms of deaf students require extra energy and expertise from their teachers. More physical effort is required to get and to keep the attention of students who depend on eye contact rather than sound. Oral methods

require the teachers' careful attention to rate and clarity of speech. Manual communication requires more actual units of energy and continues to be a strain for all but the most proficient hearing persons. Usually, it takes longer to communicate the same material " through the air" than to communicate it vocally.

Fianlly, the many bitter controversies that rage within the field of deaf education may produce stress among the combatants. As one area of conflict appears to be resolved, two others seem to spring up in its place. Now that most schools are using some form of Total Communication with some groups of children, arguments take place about the form which sign language should take, and about the placement of deaf children in mainstreaming programs. In fact, conflict and controversy are so endemic and so intense in the field of deaf education, one might wonder if they are partially a response to stress as well as a potential source of stress.

A Consequence of Stress: Teacher Burn-Out

One of the possible responses to stress is the syndrome labelled "burn-out," that has been commanding more and more attention recently among a wide range of helping professionals. Burn-out has been described in a variety of ways, for example:

> Burn-out . . . is physical, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion . . . The joy of teaching begins to slip away. . . The symptoms include being tired all of the time, sleeplessness, depression and being physically run-down. Teachers experiencing burn-out often have minor physical maladies, such as frequent colds, headaches, dizziness or diarrhea. . . Teachers report that their self-concept drops to a new low as they question the meaning of teaching . . . They see themselves becoming less effective with children and colleagues. . . The teacher feels guilty, incompetent as an educator and, finally, inadequate as a person (Hendrickson 1979:37).

These symptoms have serious consequences for the individual, for the educational institution, and for the society as a whole. These are among the reasons for suggesting that combating stress by providing support systems for educational professionals is such an important issue for the decade that lies ahead. Burn-out resulting from prolonged stress can lead professionals to leave the field of teaching altogether, resulting in the loss of valuable expertise, long investments in training, and potential contributions from some of the most dedicated and talented personnel. Another possible consequence of burn-out, observed with professionals who work with difficult populations, is that they begin to lose their former positive feelings of sympathy and helpfulness toward their students, their clients, or their patients. They begin to feel irritable and frustrated, and to blame their students for their own shortcomings or for their own handicaps. Sometimes it is too painful and threatening to turn the full force of the negative feelings on the students, so teachers may vent their negative feelings of frustration on the administrators of their programs, making demands they know in advance cannot be met.

One diagnosis lays burn-out at the institution's door: "(It) is a response to circuit overload. . .the result of unchecked stress caused by the institution's impersonal and unyielding demands and by the immediate environment in which teaching is done. If the system were less regimented and the environment more supportive, teachers would have fewer problems" (Hendrickson, 1979:37). Another source suggests that "At an institutional level, burn-out can contribute to low morale, impaired performance, absenteeism, and high job turnover" (Maslach & Jackson, 1979:59). Just as the institution participates in the development of stress leading to burn-out in teachers, so the institution must participate in the development of measures to combat and to prevent the condition.

Measures for the Prevention and Cure of Stress and Burn-Out

The major key to the prevention and cure of stress is the provision of support systems. Professionals need to work toward building their own support networks, and administrators need to be available to help in the process. (Administrators, too, need support – they are not immune from the various stress-building influences that affect educational institutions. In some ways those who feel most powerless can be those who know "the buck stops here.")

There are steps that can be taken to reduce stressful situations. Most of these steps involve change of some kind: a change in pace, a change in pattern, a change in place or situation or approach. It is somewhat paradoxical that "rapid change" is listed as a possible factor contributing to stress, and that change is also listed as a preventive measure. However, before any program can be instituted, burn-out must be recognized as an existing or a potential problem. It also is necessary to recognize the degree of potential danger burn-out poses for the individual and for the school, and that it is possible to take constructive measures to reduce stress. Teachers need opportunities to remember their reasons for originally entering the field, to find ways of maximizing their achievements, to feel pride in past successes, to know that feelings of frustration and discouragement are shared by many colleagues. Conscious, school-wide efforts by administrators to help teachers and staff members to build these feelings can yield rich rewards in terms of increased morale and generate renewed enthusiasm for jobs. (See Sparks, 1979; Hendrickson, 1979; and Miller, 1979; for additional practical suggestions for combating burn-out.)

Schools where staff development is ongoing can utilize time and personnel devoted to that process for building support. School-wide activities that lead to enriched inter-

action, to group exercise activities, to opportunities for sharing can be a good investment if they are viewed as "mental health" activities in order to give teachers a new perspective on their careers. Some schools have a policy of "mental health days" that faculty and staff can take when they truly feel worn out from the classroom.

Change in job assignment can do much to create new attitudes about work. This can present some administrative problems, but it may be worth the degree of disruption caused. The Kendall Demonstration Elementary School has experimented with temporary one-year appointments for classroom teachers to different kinds of non-classroom activities. These appointments include assignment to the Research Division to work on a specific project, and to the Outreach Unit to develop ideas for teaching materials that can be disseminated to the field. A teacher exchange program has also been started: one Kendall teacher spent a year in Trinidad, another a year in Hawaii, with teachers from those programs participating in the Kendall program for similar periods of time. Most schools may be unable to consider such long-distance exchanges, but less ambitious exchanges might be arranged.

The need for recognition of teaching achievement is s real one. Teachers need to hear from their colleagues, their students, parents, and administrators that someone knows and cares about the time, effort, and creativity that go into lesson planning, field trips, and projects.

Teachers need time out from classroom interaction during the day. Lunch duty may be a necessary chore for some teachers, but there also are other kinds of solutions to this task. For example, older students could be asked to serve as lunchroom monitors for younger children; parents might be asked to organize a volunteer squad to relieve teachers during the day.

Staff meetings can be important morale-builders, particulary if they are designed with this specific purpose in mind. Self-determination of activities by faculty and staff help in creating a feeling that they exert some control over working conditions.

School personnel should be encouraged to watch themselves and each other for signs of burn-out. Sudden irritability and negativism on the part of a generally good-natured colleague are danger signs: this kind of behavior may surface either at school with students and colleagues, or at home with children and spouses. Physical exhaustion and poor exercise, diet, or sleep habits can contribute to, as well as being symptomatic of, stress that leads to burn-out.

Finally, the enlistment of a mental health consultant, either for short-term workshops or for ongoing meetings with small groups of school personnel, can benefit the overall climate of a school. Most schools and programs for deaf children have resources and specialists at their command that could be channelled to "burn-out prevention" if school administratrators see these activities as high priority. It is usually worth the effort. One author, writing about burn-out in a free clinic setting, says, "It is precisely because we are too dedicated that we walk into a burn-out trap. We feel a pressure from within to work and help and we feel a pressure from the outside to give" (Freudenberger, 1974:161). It is the most dedicated, talented, hard-working teachers who are most likely to suffer from burn-out, but they are certainly worth saving for long years of work to benefit deaf students.

Shifting attention back to the parents of deaf students, it appears possible that we can do a better job of orienting those parents to returning to the teachers some of the support that teachers have given to them, especially in the early years of their experience with deaf education. Parent-teacher organizations could well devote some time to devising mutual support systems, where each group realizes the frustrations

and contributions of the other. The joys of parenting and of teaching special children match the difficulties that exist. Too often stress leads participants to lose sight of the benefits and rewards of their parent/teacher roles.

The fact that educators and parents of deaf children survived the difficult decade from 1970 to 1979 augurs well for the coming decade as well. Reduction of stress can lead to fewer battle scars.

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